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THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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Not for many years has an adequate popular study of the Gospel of John been presented to the Christian world. Yet this is perhaps the best loved and most frequently read of any of the Gospels. Recent scholarship has thrown much light upon the authorship of the Gospel of John and the part which it played in the developing thought of the early Christians. Investigation, although modifying some current views of this Gospel, has added greatly to its value as a Christian document. Viewed in the light of its origin and purpose it becomes replete with life, not only the life of the Master and his disciples, but with the intellectual and spiritual struggles of the Christians of the hundred years following the death of Jesus.

This course is designed to present the Gospel in the light of recent scholarship, but at the same time simply and in a form suitable for individual study or for groups in the home, the church, or the Sunday school. Leaflet reprints of the course as published each month will be furnished to those who desire them apart from the BIBLICAL WORLD, at fifty cents for the series, the regular membership fee of the INSTITUTE. Address the INSTITUTE as above, at the University of Chicago.

INTRODUCTION

The first Christians had no written Gospel. When they first came into the fellowship of the church they learned a short compend of the doings and sayings of Jesus which Paul calls the "tradition" or "traditions" because it was "handed down" from older Christians to those who later came into the churches. Paul gives two quotations from this "tradition" as he knew it (I Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:3). Nothing more was needed, for early Christians were more interested in the glorified Christ seated at the right hand of God than in the historical Jesus of Galilee, and they were expecting his speedy return on the clouds of heaven to usher in the messianic régime. No one thought of writing books. The few letters, perhaps twelve in all, which have come down to us from the first thirty-five years of Christian history were each written to serve some immediate and pressing need, not for preservation as books.

In the seventh decade of the first century something occurred to change this. The first Gospel was written. This was not simply the reduction to writing of the familiar "tradition," for it does not accord with the two fragments of that tradition which we find in First Corinthians. The earliest Gospel embodies a rival "tradition," differing at important points from that of Paul. How is this to be explained? And above all how came a Gospel to be written at all when men were expecting the speedy end of the age? The ancient explanation was, that upon the death of Peter, Mark, who had served as his interpreter in his preaching among the Greek-speaking congregations of the West, sought to preserve from oblivion the memorabilia of Jesus which he had often heard Peter relate, and so committed them to writing. This idea is clearly reflected in II Pet. 1:15, and in Justin *Dialog.* 106 3, and it is expressly stated in a fragment of Papias preserved in Eusebius *Church History* 3. 39. 15. It is not improbable that the Gospel of Mark originated in this informal way, and many of its peculiar traits are thus explained.

The Gospel of Mark with all its limitations showed the churches how useful a written Gospel might be, and led to its expansion into the Gospel of Matthew, in which much other material, especially sayings of Jesus, is combined with the material of Mark. Another effort to improve and supplement Mark was made by Luke, who sought to produce an orderly historical record. These books were much more popular and influential among early Christians than Mark was, probably because these improved forms of it appeared so soon. The Gospel of Matthew was probably written within ten years after the appearance of Mark, and Matthew remained for a long time the favorite Gospel of the early church.

The defects of Mark were largely supplied in these Gospels that were built upon it. But they were not wholly met even in them. The Gospel was still cast in highly Jewish forms, although its public was now mainly gentile. It was not related to contemporary philosophical thought in any way, and the picture these Gospels gave of Jesus was very unlike the Christ of Paul's teaching. Early in the second century a Gospel was composed at Ephesus to supply these wants. It transplanted the Gospel into Greek soil, set it in relation to Stoicism, the leading philosophy of the time, and represented Jesus in a way much nearer to the Pauline picture of him, glorified at God's right hand. Opposition to contemporary Judaism and opposition to the sect of John the Baptist appear as subordinate motives in the new Gospel, and there is besides a strong symbolic element in it which must be taken account of.

A comparison of the Gospel with the Synoptic Gospels shows that the writer is acquainted with them and in a great many instances makes use of materials taken from them, at the same time that he undertakes in other points to supplement and even to correct what they have said. This and

the strongly Pauline color of the thought of the Gospel makes it very difficult to accept the testimony of the epilogue (chap. 21) that John or any other intimate personal follower of Jesus wrote the Gospel. On the other hand, there is much to show that valuable historical materials not supplied by the synoptists were used by the writer, and these may have gone back to the hand of John the apostle, or John the disciple if, as is sometimes supposed, they were different men.

The purpose of the Gospel is stated in its closing sentences to be that its readers may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that they may thus come to have life in his name. Its conception of faith and salvation seems sometimes wholly intellectual (belief that Jesus is the Christ), sometimes wholly mystical (a life of inward union with him). We are to think of it as designed to promote faith in Jesus as the Christ and the source of spiritual life, and to reinterpret the religious significance of Jesus in terms readily intelligible to its own day.

In doing this it sometimes departs widely from the synoptists and even from Paul. They had taught that Jesus must return to complete his messianic work.¹ The new Gospel declares that he finished his work on earth, and that his promised return has already taken place in the coming of the Spirit, the comforter, into the hearts of believers. Matthew and Luke seek to explain his divine nature by the Virgin birth. The new Gospel explains it in a loftier way by finding in him the eternal divine Logos made flesh. Paul had greatly emphasized the death of Jesus. The new Gospel finds his supreme significance in his life, in which the divine life was manifested. This idea which we call the incarnation is really central in this Gospel. It has, moreover, a splendid ideal of the possibilities of Christian development under the influence of the life of God which may be shared through union with Christ. "Its great ideas of revelation, life, love, truth, and freedom, its doctrine of the Spirit as ever guiding the Christian consciousness into larger vision and achievement, and its insistence upon Jesus as the supreme revelation of God and the source of spiritual life have given it unique and permanent religious worth."^{2, 3}

¹ Read Ernest F. Scott, *The Historical and Religious Value of the Fourth Gospel; Modern Religious Problems* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909); Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Story of the New Testament*, chap. xvii (The University of Chicago Press, 1916).

² *The Story of the New Testament*, p. 123.

³ It is the intention of the author to present this course so simply that no reference books will be required. For the benefit of those who wish to make the work more comprehensive books will be mentioned from time to time.

STUDY I

THE PROLOGUE (JOHN 1:1-18); THE PERIOD OF
BEGINNINGS (1:19-4:54)

First day—§ 1. *The prologue.* Read John 1:1-18 through and note in it the expression of the great ideas of the Gospel, *incarnation, revelation, regeneration, communication of Life.* Religion has been described as the life of God in the soul of man. Does this throw any light upon these leading ideas?

Second day.—Read John 1:1-2. Cf. Gen. 1:1. Does the evangelist intentionally begin his Gospel with the opening words of Genesis? Is the "Word" the prophetic revelatory word of Jehovah which came to the prophets (Jer. 1:4; Joel 1:1, etc.) or the metaphysical "word" or *Logos* (reason) of Stoic philosophy, or are these identified by the writer, as they were by Philo of Alexandria fifty years before? In any case what is the meaning of finding in Jesus the embodiment of the *Logos*?

Third day.—Read John 1:3. Compare the idea of Christ in creation in Heb. 1:2 and especially in Col. 1:15-17. Colossians has been called "the connecting link between the Pauline writings and the Fourth Gospel." Why?

Fourth day.—Read John 1:4. The Word was not only the medium of creation, it was the source of life and light for men. Life means in John the divine life, and light means truth, or divine reality. The attainment of this higher life admits one to the light, the divine reality.

Fifth day.—Read John 1:5. The description of the Word as the seat of light is a way of saying that God had always been seeking to reveal himself to men. Light by its very nature tends to show itself. "Involved in God's inmost nature there was the will to shine forth and communicate himself to his creatures" (Scott). What in view of these facts is meant by "The darkness apprehended [i.e., admitted, appropriated] it not"? Sum up for yourself the conception of the *Logos* gathered from those five verses.

Sixth day.—Read John 1:6-8. John the Baptist is introduced as though already known to the reader. What is affirmed of him in these verses? What would this mean for any who still followed John's baptism without having accepted Jesus? Cf. Acts 18:25; 19:3. Does this definite subordination of John to Jesus appear again in John? Cf. 1:20, 27, 29, 33, 36.

Seventh day.—Read John 1:9-11. The identification of Jesus with the light already suggested in vs. 7 is now made more explicit. The evangelist forecasts the rejection of Jesus, which he is to describe more fully later in his Gospel. A special sense often attaches to the word "world" in John. What is it? Cf. 15:19; 16:20; 17:14, 16, 25, etc. Vs. 11 might be rendered, "He came home, and they that were his own received him not."

Eighth day.—Read John 1:12, 13. A description of the Christian salvation as the writer conceives it, that is, as the attainment through Christ of the life of God whose sons men thus become. What great idea of this Gospel appears in these verses?

Ninth day.—Read John 1:14. Is this a restatement in other terms of the thought of vss. 9 and 11? What if anything does it add to them? What great characteristic idea of this Gospel is expressed here? Truth is also a character-

istic word of this Gospel. Compare the parenthesis with John 1:2. "Only begotten": While all men may become sons of God, the evangelist wishes to emphasize the idea that Jesus was in a unique sense the son of God. Does Jesus continue to be described in this Gospel as the Word or is he generally described as the Son of God? Did Paul often refer to him in this latter way? Did the Synoptic¹ Gospels do so?

Tenth day.—Read John 1:15. The testimony of John the Baptist already mentioned in vs. 6 is now given in a form reminiscent of the synoptists, Mark 1:7; Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16, and anticipatory of John 1:33, 34. Justin mentions Baptists (referring to John the Baptist) among the Jewish sects (*Dial.* 80 . . .) and even in the third century the Clementine Recognitions speak of persons who proclaim John to be the Messiah. It is in opposition to such views that this summary interpretation of John's testimony to Jesus is given.

Eleventh day.—Read John 1:16, 17. These verses resume the thought of 1:14, "full of grace and truth." Jesus is the medium through whom we have received the divine life. Grace, a word not used in Matthew or Mark but very frequently by Paul, occurs only in 1:14-17 in John. It thus links to Paul's emphasis of grace its own emphasis of truth. Vs. 16 contrasts the two dispensations: the Law and grace. Does the evangelist reflect upon the Law (cf. 1:46; 3:14; 5:45), or upon the Jewish scriptures (cf. 5:39; 10:35)?

Twelfth day.—Read John 1:18. What light does this verse throw upon the writer's view of the Mosaic Law, in contrast with Christian truth? What great idea is set forth in this verse? Reread carefully vss. 1-18. What are the leading ideas and the great words of this prologue? What view of the gospel does it present? How does it view Christian salvation? In what does this consist? What does it regard as the religious significance of Jesus? By what titles does it designate him? What are the sources of these titles? There has been much discussion of the question whether the ideas of the prologue characterize the Gospel as a whole, or play little part in the further development of the writer's thought. Keep this question in mind as you advance.

Thirteenth day.—§ 2. *The testimony of John and the beginnings of faith in Jesus:* John 1:19-28. The significance of John for the evangelist is wholly that of a witness to the light: cf. 1:7, 15 above. What does this add to Mark 1:3, 7; Matt. 11:3? The Clementine Recognitions, already referred to, say (1:60): "Then one of the disciples of John asserted that John was the Christ, and not Jesus, inasmuch as Jesus himself declared that John was greater than all the prophets." "Some even of the disciples of John who seemed to be great ones have separated themselves and proclaimed their own master as the Christ" (1:54). Observe the way in which the Jews are spoken of in vs. 19 as over against John and Jesus and their followers, though these were all alike Jews. What does this suggest as to the relations of Jews and Christians when this Gospel was written? Were many Jews Christians?

Fourteenth day.—Read John 1:29-34. How does this compare with 1:15? The evangelist understands John to have been a witness of Jesus' baptismal experience. What is meant by describing Jesus as the Lamb of God? We shall observe later that the evangelist puts the date of the crucifixion on the afternoon

¹ Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels.

on which the Passover lamb was sacrificed. Note the words of Paul in I Cor. 5:7: "For our Passover also hath been sacrificed, even Christ." The sacrificial and atoning death of Christ is central in Paul's thought. Is it in that of the Gospel of John? Or is the evangelist's whole emphasis upon the life of Christ? The term "Lamb" is frequently applied to Christ in the Revelation, though the word there used is not the one employed here and in vs. 36. Note that John finally bears witness that Jesus is the Son of God (vs. 34).

Fifteenth day.—Read John 1:35-42. John directs two of his own followers to Jesus, again calling him the Lamb of God. How would this affect the claim of later followers of John that he and not Jesus was the Christ? How does this story relate to the call of Simon and Andrew in Mark 1:16-18? How does it relate to the story of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, "Thou art the Christ" (Mark 8:29)? Matthew connects Simon's new name Peter with that confession (Matt. 16:18). Both John and Matthew thus explain the fact briefly stated in Mark 3:16. In the synoptists the disciples come *gradually* to the conviction that Jesus is Messiah. How is it in John? Note especially vs. 41.

Sixteenth day.—§ 3. Read John 1:43-51. Notice that in some particulars this paragraph supplements and in others corrects the information given by the synoptists. Jesus is the son of Joseph (vs. 45). Does the Fourth Gospel show any acquaintance with the Virgin birth of Jesus, recorded in Matthew and Luke? Or does it conceive his sonship to God in a much loftier way, the incarnation of the eternal divine *Logos* in Jesus? Notice Jesus' commendation of Nathanael as an Israelite of the highest type. This frank approval of much that was Jewish runs through the Gospel along with a vigorous protest against Judaism. True to his doctrine of the nature of Jesus, the evangelist views Jesus as sharing God's omniscience, "He knew what was in man" (2:25), and his disclosure of this knowledge to Nathanael at once convinces him of Jesus' messiahship, which is stated in both the Jewish and the Pauline way. The familiar synoptic term Son of Man is here used, as usually in this Gospel, to suggest Jesus' human nature in close connection with his higher nature soon to be revealed.

Seventeenth day.—§ 4. Read John 2:1-12. This incident is perhaps suggested by the reference to the marriage celebration and the new and old wine in Mark 2:18-22. The writer records it as the first of a series of seven "signs" or wonders of divine power wrought by Jesus. But side by side with its evidential value the story has a symbolic meaning; it symbolizes the purpose and power of Jesus to transform man's nature into the higher diviner nature. Jesus' mother appears here in an attitude of approval and sympathy with his work which is nowhere suggested in the synoptists. In some passages of John the Mother of Jesus seems to symbolize the older Jewish faith from which Christianity had sprung. How would this apply here? The reference to Capernaum, vs. 12, brings us for the first time into scenes familiar in the Synoptic Gospels.

Eighteenth day.—Reread John 1:19-2:12, noting John's attitude to Jesus, Jesus' first disciples, the kind of knowledge and power he displays, and the titles applied to him. What ideas of the prologue have reappeared in these verses? How does the miracle at Cana compare with Jesus' wonders in Mark? Is it like most of them an illustration of Jesus' attitude of helpfulness and compassion? Is it like some of them capable of any natural explanation?